

Rob stood in front of the giant panda cage at the zoo, laughing as the pandas turned somersaults, twisted, and rolled. They looked like silly clowns with their round ears and black-patched eyes. He listened to the zookeeper tell about the pandas.

"Full-grown giant pandas are around five feet tall and weigh over 200 pounds," she explained.

Someone in the crowd asked, "What do they eat?"

"Wild pandas rely on bamboo about 99 percent of the time. Sometimes they will snack on meat, honey, flowers, and grass," the zookeeper answered. "Pandas eat more than 10,000 pounds of bamboo each year. They eat for as many as sixteen hours every day, taking breaks to sleep."

"Are pandas bears?" a child asked.

"Some scientists think pandas belong to the bear family, and others believe they are a part of the raccoon family. Some people claim they don't belong to either one."

Rob had heard that pandas were an endangered species. He asked, "How many pandas are still living?"

"There may only be about 1,000 survivors in the mountains of western China," she told the group. "The Chinese are very proud of pandas because these animals are only found in China. The government is trying to protect the pandas by keeping them on reserves and studying them carefully. The pandas hide deep in the thick bamboo forests in western China. This makes it difficult to study them. In China, it is against the law to hurt a panda in any way."

A man in the group of spectators asked, "How many pandas live in zoos outside of China?"

"Seventeen pandas have been given to some countries as rare gifts from the Chinese government," she responded.

"How big are baby pandas?" asked a woman.

"A newborn panda weighs only about four ounces. It is 800 times smaller than the mother is. She carefully feeds it milk so that it will quickly grow," the zookeeper answered. "The baby does not crawl until it is three or four months old. It is not ready to leave its mother until it is almost a year old."

Another person asked, "Why do you give the pandas those big ice cubes?"

"Bamboo grows high in the mountains of China. The pandas walk through many feet of snow during the coldest part of winter looking for bamboo. Because of this, they like the cold. We sometimes give them ice on hot days to cool them off a bit."

"Any more questions?" she then asked. When no one raised a hand, she suggested, "Let's move on to the reptile area."

Rob decided he would write a letter to the World Wildlife Fund to ask how he might help save the pandas.

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